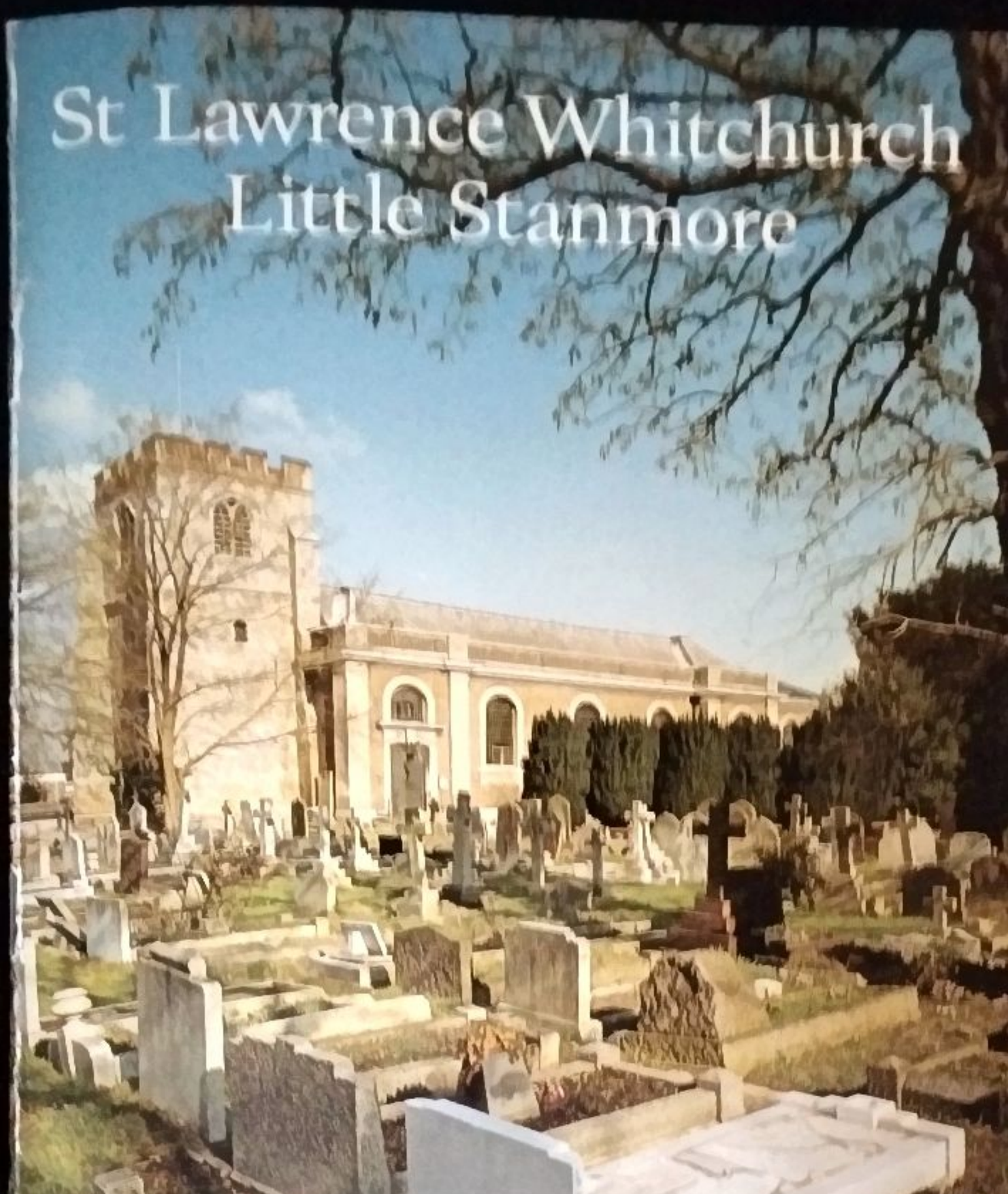
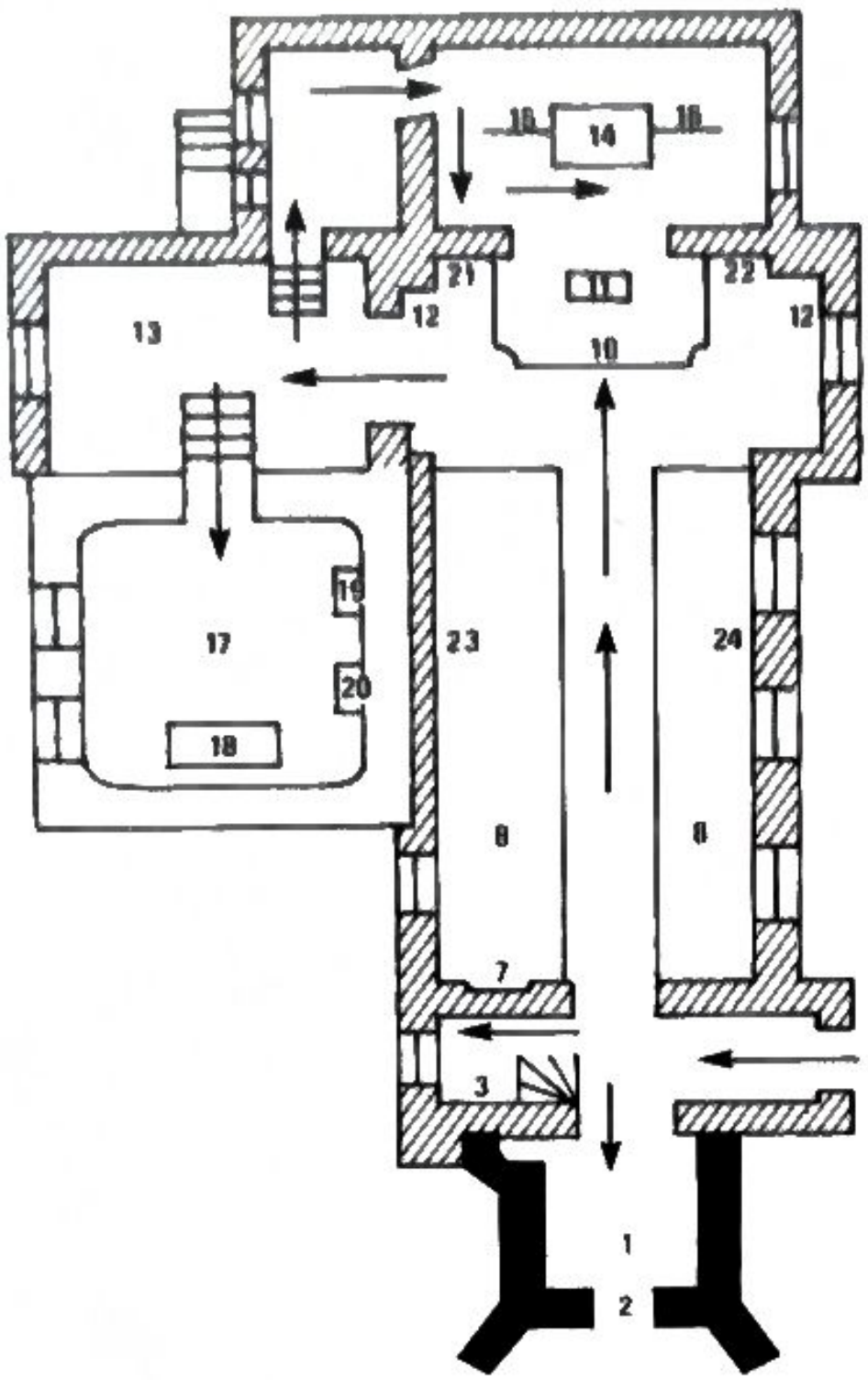
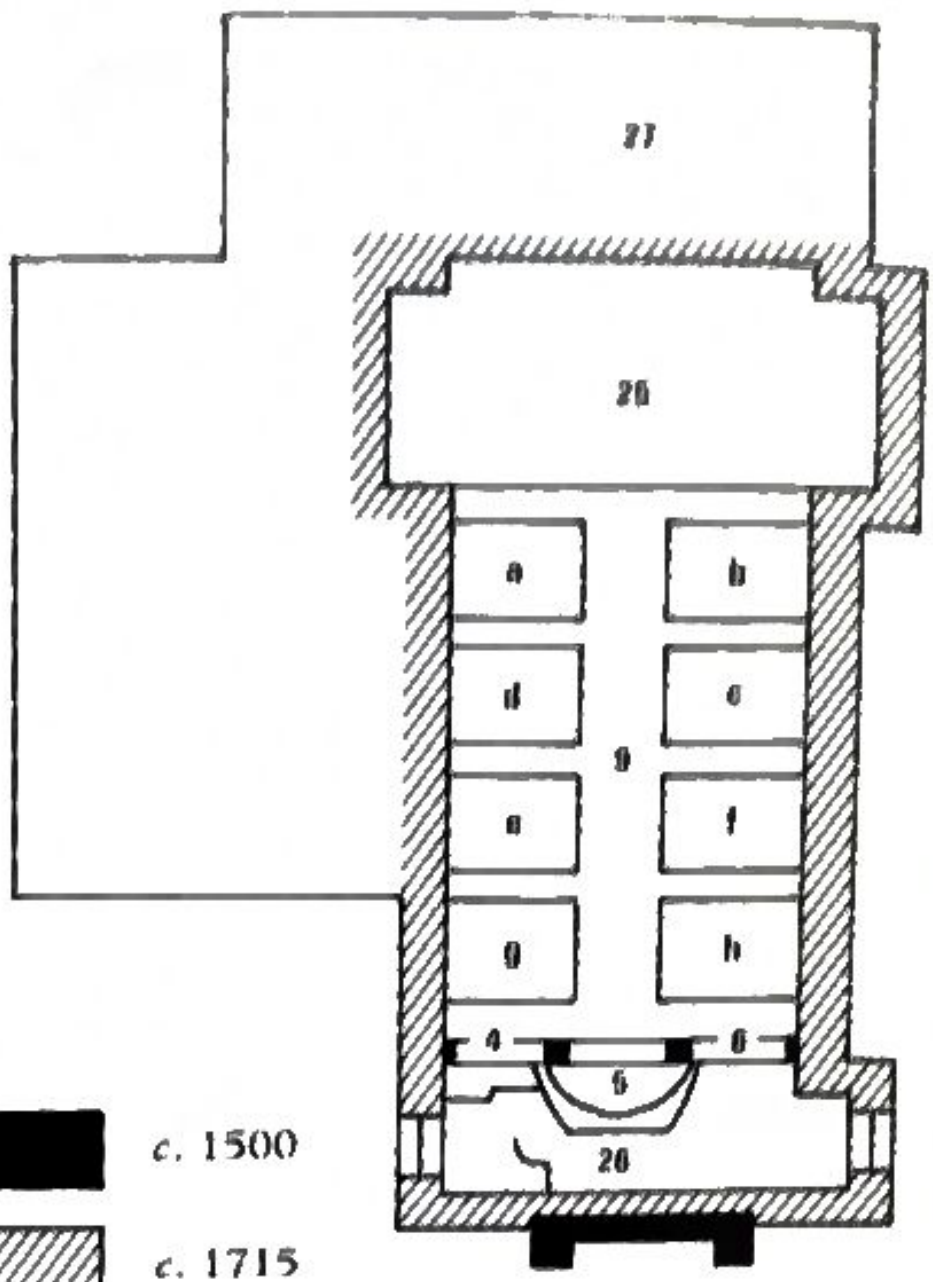
St Lawrence Whitchurch
Little Stanmore



GROUND FLOOR



CEILING AND GALLERY



c. 1500

c. 1715

c. 1735

Suggested route

1 Lady Chapel (base of tower)
2 18th-century doorway
3 Grand stair to Duke's Pew
4 Bodyguard Pew
5 Duke's Pew
6 Servants' Pew
7 Font (1716)
8 Box pews
9 Ceiling paintings (Laguerre)
  a *Changing of the water into wine*
  b *Gadarene swine*
  c *Healing at the Pool of Bethesda*
  d *Feeding of the five thousand*
  e *Walking on the water*
  f *Healing of the man born blind*
  g *Raising of Lazarus*
  h *Doubting Thomas*
10 Altar rails (1716)
11 Altar (1898)
12 Choir stalls (1905)
13 Antechamber
14 Organ case (Grinling Gibbons)
15 *The Ten Commandments*
16 *Sermon on the Mount*
17 Mausoleum
18 Monument to 1st Duke of Chandos
19 Monument to Mary Bruce
20 Monument to Margaret Nicholls
21 *Nativity* (Bellucci)
22 *Descent from the Cross* (Bellucci)
23 *Trompe l'oeil* wallpaintings (Sleter)
24 *Trompe l'oeil* wallpaintings
25 Ceiling painting: *Adoration of Jehovah*
26 Ceiling painting: *Transfiguration* (Bellucci)
27 Ceiling painting: *Imitation sky*

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St Lawrence Whitchurch Little Stanmore

A Short Guide

ABOVE: *Figures in Bellucci's* Transfiguration *float above the ducal pew.*

St Lawrence Whitchurch is unique among parish churches in this country. Retaining nearly all its original woodwork, and with all its paintings restored during the period 1973–84, its interior differs little from what it must have been when it was fresh and new in the early 18th century. The style is not the English baroque of Christopher Wren but the dramatic baroque of continental Europe. Characteristic baroque features are the imitation sky in the retro-choir behind the altar, lit by a concealed window; the *trompe l'oeil* statues with their dramatic poses; and the painted scenes covering both walls and ceiling. The drama is accentuated by its theatrical design – three boxes at the west end, complete with painted curtains held by naked cherubs, and at the east end what is in effect a stage in front of the organ, behind a proscenium arch. A splendid setting for the rebuilder of the church, the first Duke of Chandos, sitting in his ducal gallery to hear his musicians perform a Chandos Anthem, which would be directed from the organ keyboard by his composer in residence, George Frideric Handel; and entirely suited to its current primary purpose, modern liturgical worship.

How did St Lawrence's come to have such a distinctive interior? Although it has always been a parish church and not a private chapel, it must have been built to the taste of the Duke of Chandos, who followed a fashion soon to be superseded by the more severe Palladian style favoured by the Earl of Burlington. St Lawrence's was probably built almost as a by-product of the Duke's great house of Cannons, under construction at the same time. The closest analogies to Whitchurch are country house chapels such as those at Chatsworth and Wimpole Hall.

Within living memory, the **parish** of Little Stanmore was a pleasant rural area, tall trees forming a canopy above Whitchurch Lane. Although it lacks a typical village centre, records suggest that it has boasted a church since Saxon times, and the dedication to St Lawrence implies an early foundation. The coming of the Underground railways during the 1920s and 1930s engulfed the parish in suburbia, but the church with its two-acre churchyard and the adjoining park and playing fields preserve an oasis of greenery.

A walk round the **exterior** of St Lawrence's can tell us much of its history. First there is the tower, stone-built with brick battlements, its staircase turret projecting above the tower roof. The brick battlements and Tudor-style tower arch suggest a late 15th-century date. But the masonry of the lower walls, from which a covering of plaster was removed during repairs in

The splendour of the east end, with the Chandos plate displayed behind the altar.

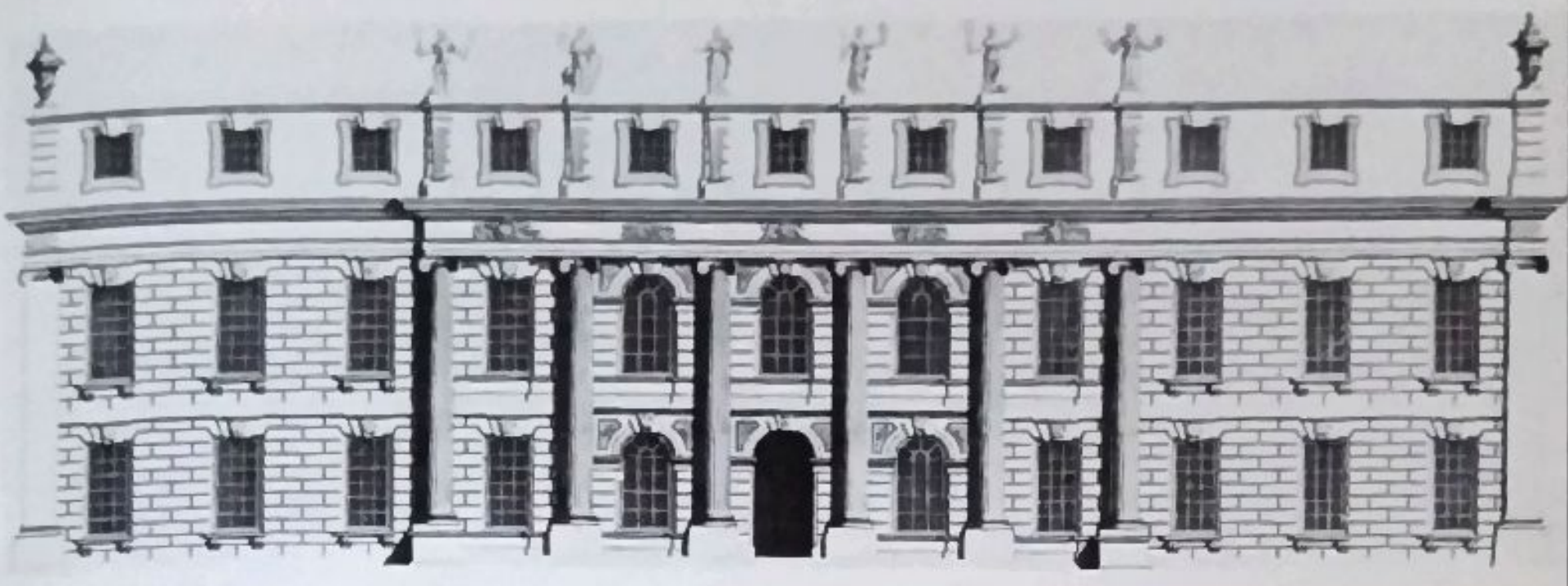
1950, could date from the early middle ages, and includes red Roman tiles deriving no doubt from a Roman tile kiln discovered in the nearby spinney. The tower is all that is left of the medieval church mentioned in old documents and, by implication, in the church registers dating back to 1558, but no records exist to show what it was like. The tower contains one bell, dated 1774.

Moving eastwards from the tower, we find brickwork and round-headed windows indicating an 18th-century building. Its date, 1715, is written on no less than three rain-water hoppers. On the north side a projecting red-brick portion indicates a later addition, dating in fact from 1735. Completing our tour at the west end, we see an elegant circular window and round-headed doorway inserted into the medieval tower, probably as a ceremonial private entrance for the lordly rebuilder of the church.

The church was rebuilt by James Brydges, first **Duke of Chandos** (1674–1744). His father, Baron Chandos, came from a minor and rather decayed aristocratic family, but by assiduous place-seeking the young James secured for himself the lucrative post of Paymaster-General to the Duke of Marlborough, and he emerged from this post with a great fortune. In 1696 he had married Mary Lake of Cannons, a country house half a mile north of the church, and about the time of her death in 1712 and his own retirement from office he bought the house from the Lake family. What he acquired was a fine park and Tudor mansion, but he soon decided to pull it down and replace it by one designed in the latest style, just as he did with the church. The house achieved some fame, or notoriety, for its lavish appointments and the style in which he lived. But after the first Duke's death, the second Duke, encumbered by debts, pulled it down and sold off the contents in lots over the period 1747–53. Of the first Duke's extensive building work in Little Stanmore only St Lawrence Whitchurch survives.

Of the many artists employed by the Duke, nearly all from overseas, **George Frideric Handel** (1685–1759) was the only one who achieved unquestioned international reputation, and although he was at Cannons for only a short time early in his career, his name has always been associated with the church.

Handel lived in England permanently from 1712; around 1717–18 he worked for the Duke and lived for some time at Cannons as composer in residence. The Duke had a concert of twenty or so musicians, under the direction of another composer of note, John Christopher Pepusch, of *Beggar's Opera* fame. Handel composed for the Duke eleven Chandos Anthems, the Chandos *Te Deum* and the masques *Acis and Galatea* and *Haman and Mordecai*; these works were almost certainly performed in



the church, since the chapel at Cannons was not finished until August 1720. It was *Haman and Mordecai*, adapted in 1732 for performance without costumes or scenery and renamed *Esther*, which became the first English oratorio, a genre which might be said to reach a climax in the *Messiah*, first performed in Dublin in 1742.

In the churchyard directly east of the church is a tombstone erected in 1863 to commemorate William Powell, parish clerk and village

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ABOVE: *'The Duke of Chandos has built a most Magnificent Palace' (Daniel Defoe). The south front of Cannons, engraved by Hulsbergh, 1720.*

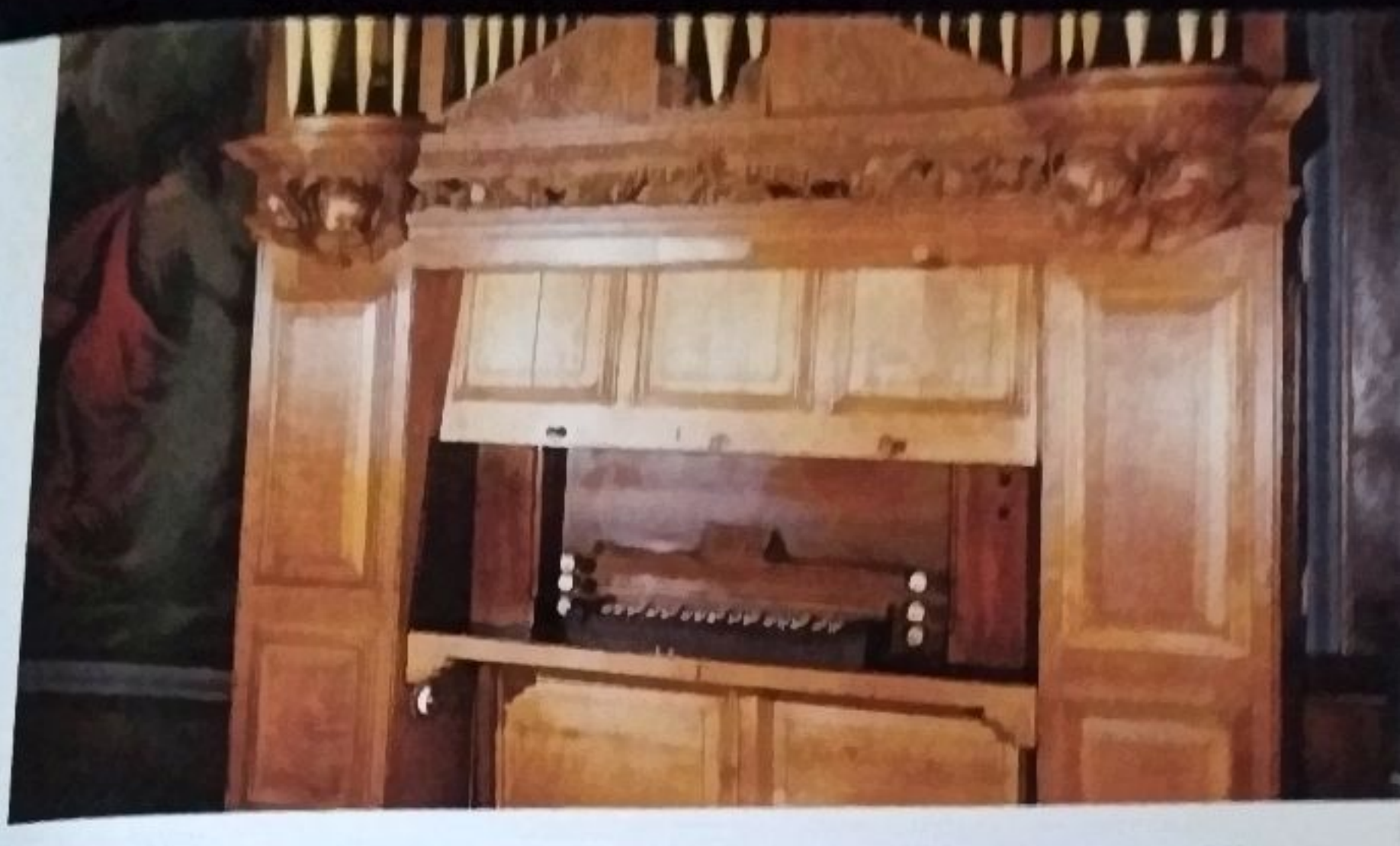
RIGHT: *James Brydges, first Duke of Chandos (1674–1744), attributed to Herman van der Myn.*

OVERLEAF: *Baroque extravagance in Laguerre's* Adoration of Jehovah *above the altar. The Hebrew tetragrammaton appears in many contemporary bibles.*

blacksmith, who died in 1780. The story goes that Handel took shelter from the rain in his smithy and was inspired by the notes of his anvil to compose the variations in E major in his *Suite de Pièces pour le Clavecin* which have become known as 'The Harmonious Blacksmith'. The suite was probably composed about that time, but other dates do not fit and sadly the story must be dismissed as an agreeable legend.

The **interior** of the church, magnificent as it is, does not lack restraint. Between the blaze of colour at the east and west ends is a more subdued area, with the walls painted in grey (or *grisaille*) and the ceiling in quiet tones of sepia. The subjects of the **paintings** represent a brave attempt to present the whole scheme of Christian salvation. The sequence is not entirely logical, but there is a drift from, surprisingly, east to west. The ceiling above the altar depicts the Adoration of Jehovah, who is represented by Hebrew letters: of all the paintings, this is the most baroque in feeling, with its swirling limbs and draperies. On either side of the organ are the Ten Commandments and their New Testament counterpart, the Sermon on the Mount. Our Lord's Nativity and His redeeming Passion are to be seen on either side of the altar. The eight panels on the ceiling show miracles taken mostly from St John's Gospel: our Lord's first miracle, changing water into wine, is in the north-east corner, and the last one represented, St Thomas accepting Christ's Resurrection, in the south-west. Over the ducal pew is a beautiful painting of the Transfiguration – perhaps the best work of art in the church – based, rather freely, on Raphael's famous painting in the Vatican. The walls of the church show the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; St Peter and St Paul; and the Christian virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity.

There is a tiresome absence of documentation about the building of the church and the artists employed. The architect was John James. As regards the paintings, tradition and style both suggest that



the whole of the ceiling was painted by Louis Laguerre, whose work is to be found all over England in such great houses as Chatsworth, Burghley and Blenheim. The *Nativity*, *Descent from the Cross* and the *Transfiguration* are almost certainly by the Venetian artist Antonio Bellucci. The north wall paintings, dating from about 1736, are attributed on style to Francesco Sleter, who painted some rather similar ones at Moor Park, Herts.

Apart from the paintings, the glory of the interior is the Corinthian columns and other **woodwork** carved by Grinling Gibbons. All this intricate carving was stripped of dark Victorian varnish by members of the congregation during the 1970s, revealing its original golden oak colour.

Beneath this exotic continental splendour nestle the elements of a thoroughly English 18th-century parish church, with its simple box pews, memorial tablets and records of charitable bequests. The **box pews** enshrine much of the history of the church as it has been used by ordinary worshippers. Small pieces of chain indicate the location of chained 18th-century prayer books, of which a few survive, and carved initials on the north side, but not on the south, show where the men and boys with their penknives used to sit, separated from the women.

In the north-west corner of the

LEFT: *George Frideric Handel (1685–1759). Painting attributed to Balthasar Denner, 1726–8.*

ABOVE: *The organ known to Handel around 1717.*

nave is a small baptistry containing an elegant Italian marble font given by the Duke in 1716. At the same time he donated eight pieces of silver-gilt communion plate, still exhibited in the church at least once a year. In 1809 the Church Vestry Meeting ordered this to be done every Easter, after the Rector of the time had pawned it! At the east end, the pulpit, the wrought-iron altar rails and the pavement are original 18th-century, but the altar itself and the choir stalls were introduced about 1900.

The **west gallery** is approached by a broad oak staircase with a wrought-iron balustrade. On the walls are three large hatchments dating, unusually, from the 19th century. By this staircase the Duke and his Duchess would ascend to take their places well clear of the common people assembled below. Tradition has it that the Duke and his family occupied the centre box, his bodyguard the small box at the head of the stairs, and the servants in their several degrees the plain tiered seating in the box on the south side. Inserted panelling in the centre box conceals the remains of a fireplace, useful to the ducal party when the church had no other form of heating. From the west gallery one can admire the Dutch-style brass chandeliers – not ancient (they were introduced in 1984) but appropriate to the period – and the ceiling, with its paintings and gold-leaf decoration.

The **organ** is situated in the retro-choir behind the sanctuary. In the centre is the original organ-case, with its cherubs, pea-pods and other typical Grinling Gibbons decorations. Also preserved is the keyboard on which Handel would have played – a great treasure, with the normal white and black notes reversed. This keyboard of three octaves may have been cut down from four, but Handel's instrument was only a small six-stop chamber organ mainly providing a continuo for the Duke's concert. It was built by Gerard Smith, nephew of the famous organ-builder Father Smith. The organ has been extended several times in its long history, but at least one of the stops at present in use, the Open Diapason on the Swell, is original. Before the extensions the organ was some distance further east, allowing more room for instrumentalists and showing to greater advantage the imitation sky. In 1913 the present detached console was installed in front of the pews on the north side, and the original keyboard replaced as we see it now.

Through the glass door in the north transept is an area known as the **Antechamber**, originally built by the Duke as his monument room. It has 18th-century paintings depicting architectural decoration, and there are six hatchments of later members of the Brydges family; two

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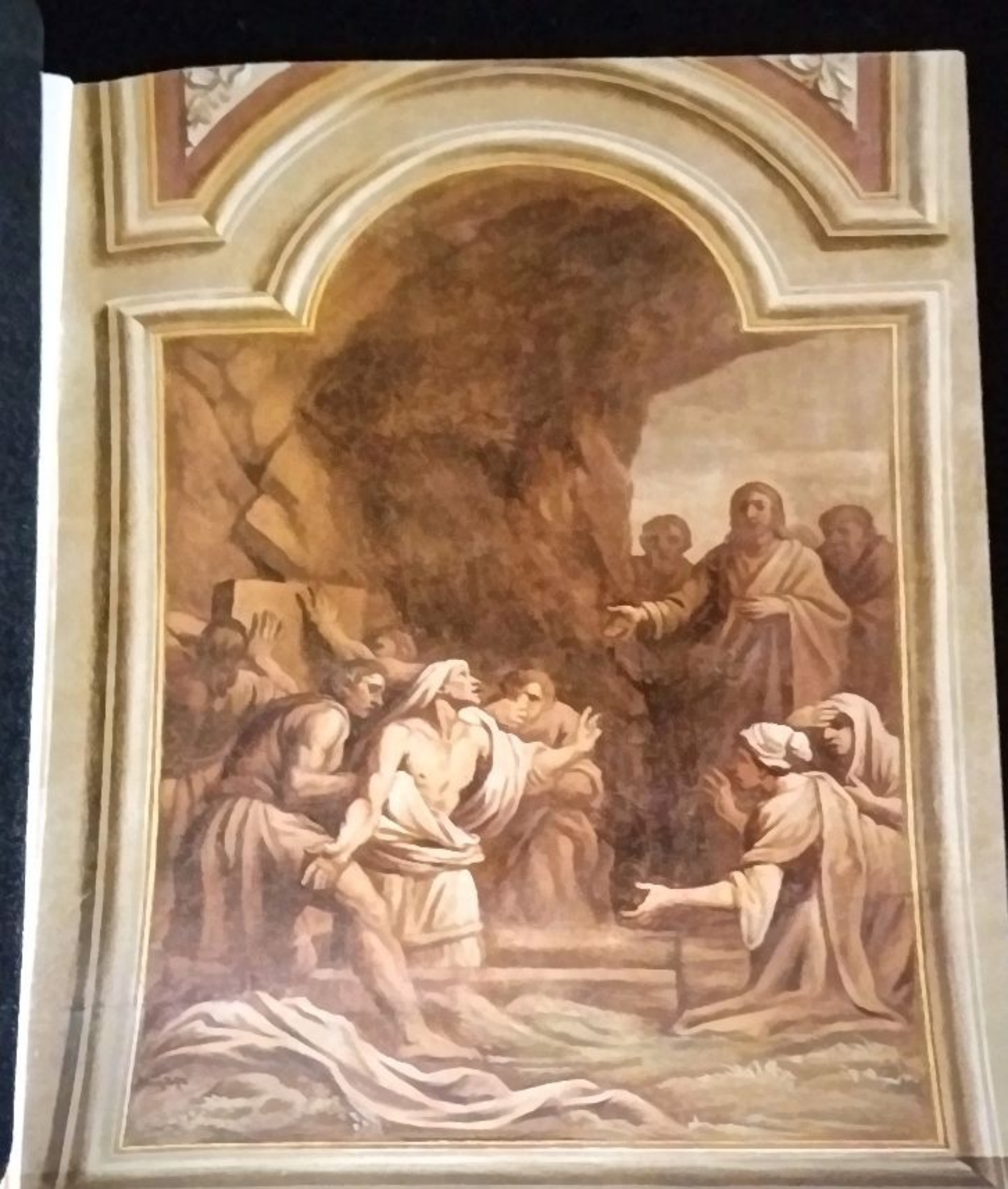
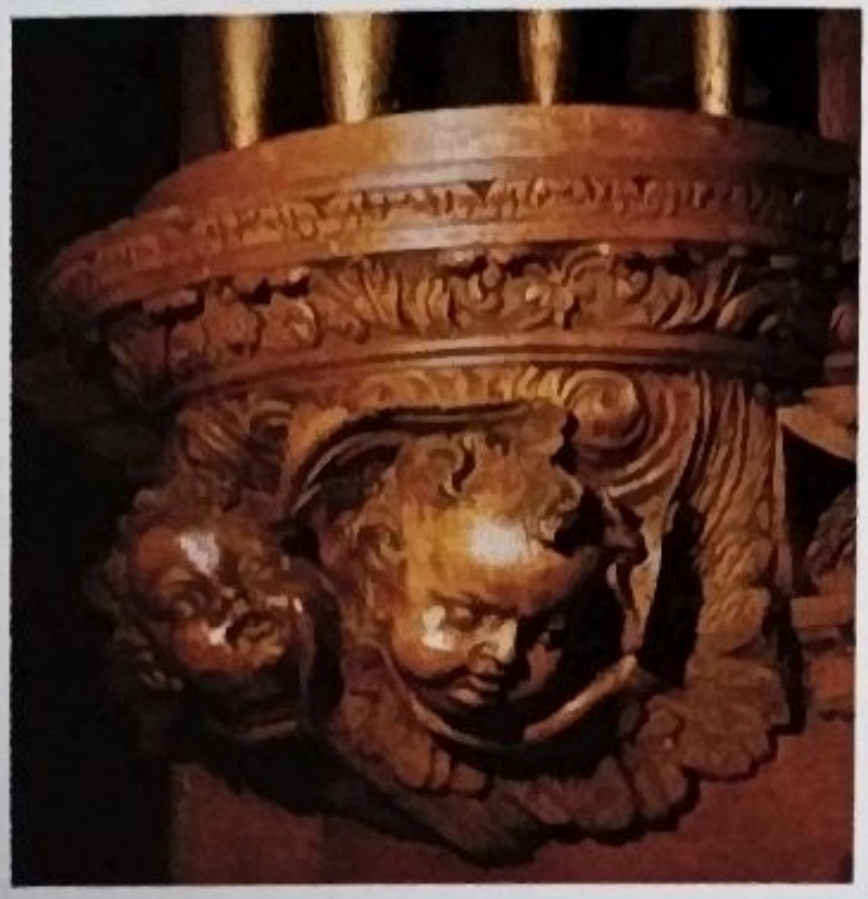
Laguerre's Raising of Lazarus, *one of eight ceiling panels depicting miracles of Christ.*



are duplicated, because they were exhibited outside two family houses. The tattered remnants of the Duke's banner are also displayed.

When the Duke's second wife died in 1735, he decided that this monument room was inadequate, and added the larger **Mausoleum** we now see; it is under the care of the Redundant Churches Fund. Designed by James Gibbs, its walls are decorated with convincing *trompe l'oeil* columns and figures by the Italian artist Gaetano Brunetti. Looking up the steps through the elegant wrought-iron gate, one can see the monument to the first Duke and his first two wives which formerly stood in the Antechamber. This was designed by Grinling Gibbons some twenty-seven years before the Duke died. It shows the Duke, in wig and Roman tunic, with his wives Mary Lake and Cassandra Willoughby kneeling on either side. Two other monuments were later placed in the Mausoleum; an elegant monument by Sir Henry Cheere to Mary Bruce, first wife of the second Duke, and a plainer one to Margaret Nicholls, first wife of the third Duke. All the monuments have typically flowery 18th-century inscriptions. Beneath the Mausoleum are forty-one coffins of the Brydges family.



EPILOGUE

The ground floor of the tower was converted in 1966 into a delightful **Lady Chapel**, in complete contrast to the style of the remainder of the church. It provides an intimate setting for private prayer and weekday services. Thick medieval walls and modern furnishings remind us that prayer and worship have been offered down the centuries in successive buildings on the site. We should also recall that the church has come down to us in its present state not only through spectacular projects of restoration, such as that documented in 1984 in the television programme 'Former Glory', but by the constant care and maintenance of the church community throughout its long history.

LEFT: *Grinling Gibbons's cherubs adorn the original organ case of 1716.*

RIGHT: *Looking through the Mausoleum gateway: the monument to the first Duke of Chandos.*

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